



# The Immortal Jane Austen

Maggie Lane

*Jane Austen*



# Jane Austen's Family



Jane 1775-1817



Francis William 1774-1865



Charles John 1779-1852



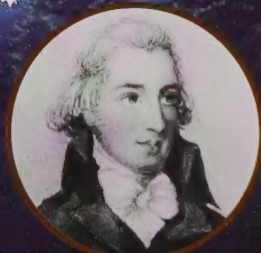
Edward 1767-1852



Henry Thomas 1771-1850



Cassandra Elizabeth 1773-1845



James 1765-1819



George 1766-1838



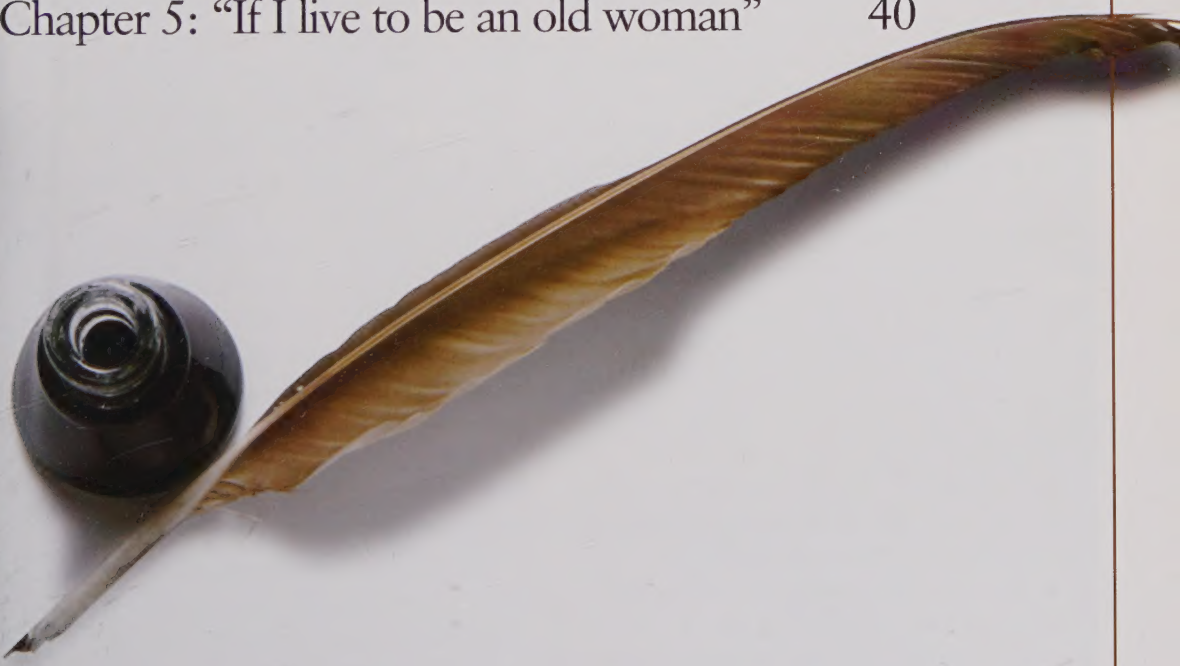
George Austen 1731-1805



Cassandra Leigh 1739-1827

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# Introduction

It is almost two hundred years since *Sense and Sensibility* was published anonymously ('by a Lady', the title page declared modestly). In what must be one of the richest periods in all English literature, the second decade of the nineteenth century saw the publication of all six of Jane Austen's novels, one after another from 1811 to 1817. This outpouring was possible only because three of the six had been written and rewritten over the course of her adult life. The pity is that this life, so productive, so mature in its perceptions, was then cut cruelly short. We can only guess how many more works of genius might have flowed from her pen had her body remained as healthy as her mind.

The six novels that she left as the trace of her brief life upon this earth have never been out of print. They earned her very little money, and even less fame, in her lifetime. Her early following was small, but devoted. New novelists, like Dickens and the Brontës, came along to captivate the reading public's attention, but within each generation there were those who discovered and delighted in the witty, polished stories that were like nobody else's. The publication, in 1869, of her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh's *Memoir of Jane Austen* fuelled interest in this quaint Regency lady and the bygone world of which she wrote. Illustrated editions began to appear in the 1890s, charming the reader with the high-waisted dresses and elegant carriages of the pre-railway age. More seriously, distinguished novelists like Henry James and Virginia Woolf set themselves to examine exactly what it was that made this woman, writing only about a limited segment of society, such a great artist.

Since then, her reputation has burgeoned in a unique twofold manner. Studied on university campuses across the world, her work is the subject of countless academic books, some impenetrable, others admirably enlightening. She also has a passionate following among the general reading public, thousands of whom read and reread her over their lifetimes, always finding something new to laugh at and admire. Film and TV adaptations have brought new fans almost every year since the mid-1990s, and given existing admirers new interpretations to refresh their interest. Societies – some learned, some based on pure fun – meet regularly in her name. Sequels and spin-offs come in ever-increasing numbers to satisfy our longing for 'more of Jane Austen' (though nobody ever fools themselves that they can write like *her*). Though her 'world' is fast disappearing and her values increasingly at odds with modern life (can young people fathom why Lydia Bennet *shouldn't* live with George Wickham before they are married, or why Anne Elliot can't let Captain Wentworth know that she still has feelings for him?), yet she can be refashioned to be 'relevant', or else packaged to fit the nostalgia market.

And still the words on the page, precise, elegant, funny and wise, remain for all time. She is inexhaustible, indestructible. An immortal novelist, whose earthly existence yet was – to quote *Emma* – 'chequered, à la mortal'. Like Emma herself, Jane Austen experienced 'some of the best blessings of existence' but like any life, hers was not without its moments of difficulty and despair. Out of the finely-chequered texture of experience and imagination, she created six works of art which will surely live for ever.





*Jane Austen, from a steel engraving based on the only known sketch of the author, by her sister Cassandra. Jane's portrait was never professionally taken as she was neither rich nor important enough during her lifetime. Note the wedding ring added by the Victorian engraver*



## Chapter One

# A Goodly Heritage

Jane Austen was one of eight brothers and sisters, all sharing the same social and intellectual background, and, of course, the same gene pool. With one exception – a mentally-disabled brother – all the Austen siblings were clever and many were high achievers – but only she possessed true genius, the genius to create fresh works of art. Though individual genius can never be explained, there was much in Jane Austen's heritage that assisted it to flourish.

Her family was hugely important to her, supporting and understanding her, and providing outlets for her affection. Their various personalities were, as her letters attest, a delight. The family as a whole, the meld of Austen and Leigh that her parents' marriage brought about, placed her at a certain level in society that suited the making of a novelist. Though both her parents came from the poorer branches of their respective families, they were well-connected. Jane may have had financial insecurities as she grew older, but she was never an outsider. She thoroughly understood the society to which she belonged.

Her father, George Austen, was a scholarly man with a serene, sunny and sometimes over-optimistic outlook on life. Never rich, he was inclined to commit himself to expenditure a little beyond his means – perhaps, like Mr Micawber, trusting that something would turn up. For example, in the 1790s, when Jane and her sister Cassandra were of an age to go to balls, he invested in a carriage, but soon found its upkeep too great. And when the



*The Reverend George Austen*

family moved to Bath, he chose a house whose rental was too high, and it had to be given up for something more modest when the lease expired.

Not that George was feckless – and he was far from idle. An ordained clergyman, he was incumbent of two neighbouring parishes, and did all the work of both, until his eldest son was old enough to help him as curate. Most of George's income, however, came from a 200-acre farm which he rented and oversaw, with the help of a trusty farm bailiff. Both he and his wife threw themselves enthusiastically into agriculture, though neither had been bred to it. Farming talk – crops, weather, markets – would have been a familiar part of Jane Austen's life from her earliest consciousness. She was always acutely aware of the seasons, and was one of the

first to use them effectively in the novel.

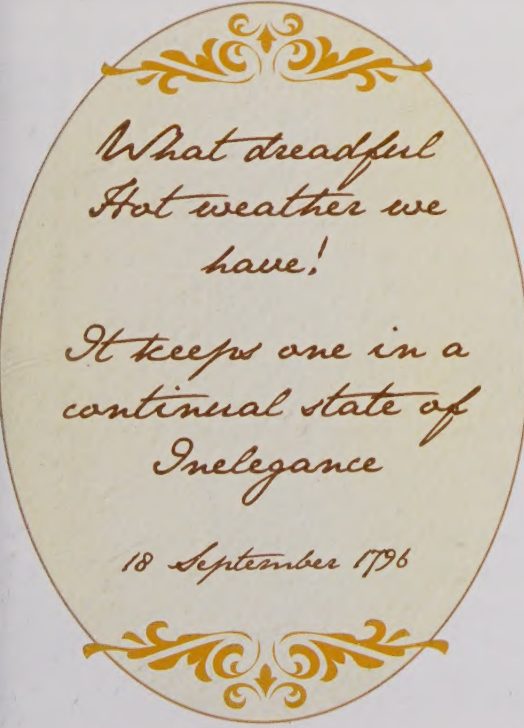
Mr Austen was not only a parish priest and a farmer. To improve the family finances even more, he used every nook of his seven-bedroom parsonage-house by taking in three or four boarding pupils at a time. They were taught alongside his own sons. Preparing boys for university entrance – which at that date, of course, meant proficiency in Latin and Greek – was probably his most congenial work, for he was a true scholar by nature. He must have been a kindly and patient master, for many of the boys remembered him with affection when they were grown up. Given his literary interests and habit of teaching, we can imagine how he must have encouraged his own daughter's reading and writing.

It was George Austen's intellectual prowess which had lifted him out of poverty. The Austens of Kent had, over several centuries, built up a considerable

fortune from the wool trade, but George's father William belonged to a branch of the family who had fallen on hard times. William's mother Elizabeth, left a widow, had taken the post of matron and housekeeper at Sevenoaks School in exchange for board and lodging, and free education for all her sons. They were all apprenticed into various professions, but had to start from scratch. William became a doctor, but died before he could make much money, leaving George and two sisters unprovided for. George was just six when he was left an orphan. He and his sisters were taken in by various members of the family, but while one sister was apprenticed to a milliner and another shipped off to India to find herself a husband, George's academic potential was recognised by his uncle Francis Austen, a solicitor and agent to the Duke of Dorset, whose estate was Knole in Kent. Francis, who did not marry until he was fifty, and then married two wealthy widows in succession, was to become the most successful of Elizabeth Austen's children, doggedly building up the family fortunes again.

Francis paid for George to be educated at Tonbridge School, from where he won a scholarship to St John's College, Oxford. After gaining his Master's degree, George was ordained and elected Fellow of his college. He returned to his old school as assistant master in term time and spent his vacations at St John's – where he was known as "the handsome Proctor" – until his marriage at the age of thirty-three.

He was enabled to marry thanks to a distant and very wealthy relation, Thomas Knight of Godmersham in Kent, who also owned two country estates in Hampshire: Steventon and Chawton. Impressed by



*What dreadful  
Hot weather we  
have!*

*It keeps one in a  
continual state of  
Inelegance*

*18 September 1796*



# *The Church of England*

*In the eighteenth century, the Church of England controlled and permeated many aspects of life. As the established religion, its Bishops sat in the House of Lords, with a powerful voice in the nation's legislation.*

*The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge had been founded to educate men for holy orders, and the vast majority of graduates in Jane Austen's time went into the church. Increasingly wealthy, the church provided a house and income for many a younger son of the gentry and aristocracy. Not for nothing was a parish known as a living.*

*Some livings were in the gift of the Universities, the Cathedrals or the Crown, but most were in private ownership, to be doled out to members of the family. Many handsome rectories were built by these private owners in the Georgian period. The life of the clergyman could be as indolent or as useful as he chose.*

George's work ethic, Thomas Knight presented him with the living of Steventon, after which Uncle Francis bought him the neighbouring living of Deane.

It was from Thomas Knight that George rented the farm at Steventon. As Mr Knight let out the Manor House there and never went near the place, George was regarded locally as his representative, with all the status that conferred.

**H**andsome, clever, sweet-natured and now provided with a livelihood and a home, George offered marriage to Miss Cassandra Leigh. He probably met her at Oxford, where one of her uncles (Theophilus Leigh) was Master of Balliol for fifty years. Her own father, another academic high-flyer, had

been a country parson at Harpsden in Oxfordshire, but had since retired to Bath. As a clergyman's daughter she was therefore well-suited to becoming a clergyman's wife, but she was considerably better-born than her husband. One of her relations was the Duke of Chandos and another was Lord Leigh of Stoneleigh in Warwickshire. Her grandparents had owned the considerable property of Adlestrop in Gloucestershire, now in the possession of her first cousin, Thomas Leigh; and her own brother James had inherited another estate, Scarlets in Berkshire, from a maternal relation, becoming James Leigh Perrot in the process. It should always be remembered that Jane Austen was half-Leigh, and that therefore although she took her place



among the minor gentry (the middling people of whom she loved to write) she had firm connections to the aristocracy. She was no snob, but neither did she suffer from a sense of social insecurity. Many of the southern counties of England were, in a sense, family territory.

Cassandra Leigh, though proud of the aristocratic cut of her nose, was not above being the hard-working wife of a clergyman and farmer. She was a practical, energetic and forthright woman, who enjoyed farming and gardening all her life – as an old lady she still dug potatoes in an old smock. She also had a very lively mind, with a particular talent for writing comic verse.

She married George at St Swithin's church in Bath on 26 April 1764, dressed in a red riding habit. The couple set off from the church door directly to Hampshire, where the bride saw her new home for the first time. In fact, Steventon Rectory was in so dilapidated a state that the young couple occupied the parsonage house at Deane while it was renovated. Their children James, George and Edward were born at Deane; the births of Henry, Cassandra, Francis, Jane and Charles followed at Steventon.

When young Francis, born ten years after his parents' marriage, was of an age to require his first suit of clothes, his mother fashioned him one out of the red riding habit which had been one of her staple outfits ever since she got married. Nothing better illustrates her practical skills and thrifty turn of mind, or her lack of pride and show. Later, her daughters were to feel a little ashamed of how their mother blithely carried on with mending clothes when visitors came to call. Ladies were supposed to do only dainty work, like

embroidery, in public, but Mrs Austen had no time for such airs.

She was adept at all the domestic arts required to keep a large household running on a limited budget. Though several servants were employed, Mrs Austen had to direct them in their work. The dairy, brewhouse, poultry-yard and kitchen garden were under her control, as well as the house itself. Almost all the food which this large household consumed was reared or cultivated at home.

George and Cassandra Austen formed a strong partnership, founded on mental compatibility and shared values. Together they strove to make their income go as far as possible and to provide a comfortable, healthy and happy environment in which to raise their family.

One of their child-rearing ideas now strikes us as odd, if not cruel. Between the ages of three and fifteen months, each infant was put out to nurse in the village. Though they were visited every day by one or both of their parents, only when they could walk were they received back home. Considering the state of hygiene in the cottages of the day, this seems an extreme risk, quite apart from any conflict of attachment – but it paid off, for the Austens lost not one of their brood in infancy or childhood, highly unusual for the time. They remained an exceptionally affectionate and united family, pulling together and helping one another out all their lives.

**B**eyond being lucky in her family, Jane Austen was the beneficiary of a goodly heritage in a wider sense. She was born into an England that was stable and rising in prosperity. Physically, the countryside was in a state of loveliness





*St Swithin's Church, Walcot, Bath. Jane's parents were married in the former church on this site, and her father is buried here. His gravestone and a memorial plaque to the Austen family are located in the enclosure on the east side of the church.*

thanks to the enclosure of fields and planting of timber. Advances in road-building and carriage design enabled people to travel purely for pleasure for the first time in history. They became acquainted with their own country, and manners improved as people mingled more. Holidays were taken, first at the spa towns like Bath, later at the seaside resorts which became fashionable during Jane's lifetime. More diffused wealth meant a building boom: Georgian architecture graced houses large and small, from the great country estates to market towns and rural rectories.

The spread of literacy and growth of the middle classes had, some fifty years before she was born, led to the creation of a new type of literature: the novel. Structured round moral and social dilemmas of everyday life and displaying a variety of characters, the novel set out to

be both entertaining and instructive to the reading masses, reflecting back to them a recognisable world. Its early practitioners had been men, but in the 1780s and 90s, as Jane was growing up, many published novelists were women.

The novel indeed was one of the few art forms equally open to women, requiring in practical terms only paper, pen, and a certain amount of leisure – and in creative terms such qualities as knowledge of the human heart that women possessed in equal measure to men. These successful female writers provided the young Jane Austen with role models; they stimulated her imagination and, with their wilder flights of fancy, developed her sense of the absurd. All the Austens were enthusiastic but critical novel-readers and their home was filled with talk about books: it was the ideal preparation for a novelist in the making.







## Chapter Two

# A Country Girlhood

**F**or the first twenty-five years – that is more than half – of her life, Jane Austen lived at Steventon Rectory in north Hampshire. She was born there on 16 December 1775, the seventh child and second daughter of the Rector's family. We know that she was warmly welcomed into the family because a letter exists from Mr Austen announcing the birth to some relations in Kent.

"She is to be Jenny," he writes fondly – although we never hear of her being called so again. (These sorts of diminutives – Betty, Molly, Patty, etc.,

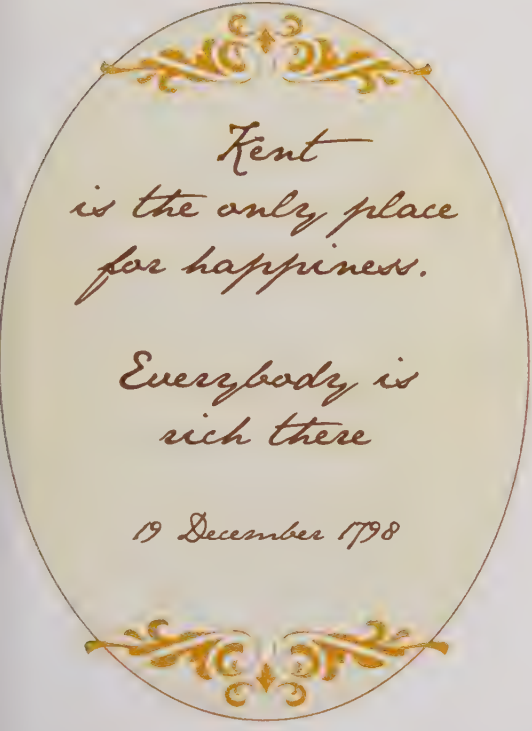
once perfectly acceptable, were slipping down the social scale in the late eighteenth century and are confined to servants in Jane Austen's novels.) She was christened simply Jane, after her Leigh grandmother and aunt, and the wife of old Francis Austen who was her godmother. She was given no middle name, which was slightly odd, as her sister was Cassandra Elizabeth and her three youngest brothers each had two names apiece.

Jane was less than twenty-four hours old when Mr Austen's letter was written, and in describing her as "a present plaything for her sister Cassy and a future companion," he shows remarkable foresight. Cassandra was almost three



*Steventon Rectory, where Jane was born and where she spent the first twenty-five years of her life. Early versions of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey* were written in this house, which was demolished in 1823. Sketched by Anna Austen Lefroy, Jane's niece.*





*Kent  
is the only place  
for happiness.*

*Everybody is  
rich there*

*19 December 1798*

years older than Jane, having been born in January 1773. She seems to have had a calm and capable nature, and Jane is said by family tradition to have looked up to her – natural in a younger sister. The two sisters, who remained the only girls in the family, were to be exceptionally close all their lives, always on the same wavelength as it were. They seemed to have shared every thought, merry or serious, as we can tell from Jane's letters to Cassandra throughout their adult lives whenever the two sisters were parted for a few weeks by family visits.

Unfortunately Cassandra's side of the correspondence was not preserved, so we simply do not know her as well as we feel we know Jane. But a touching letter to a niece after Jane's death is testimony to their closeness. "I have lost a treasure, such a Sister, such a friend as never can

have been surpassed," Cassandra wrote. When Cassandra was ten and Jane seven, it was decided to send the elder daughter away to school, with one of her cousins, Jane Cooper. But little Jane made such a fuss about being left behind that her parents gave in and she was allowed to go too, despite being so young to leave home. Evidently Jane's attachment to her big sister was greater than that to her overworked mother, who probably had less time for her. As Mrs Austen herself ruefully remarked, if Cassandra were going to have her head cut off, Jane would insist on sharing her fate.

On the subject of education, the Austens were again unusual in paying for their girls to go to school but educating the sons at home. Most families did it the other way round. Mr Austen must have felt that nobody could give his sons their grounding in the classics as well as he could do himself – certainly not as cheaply. Girls' education, consisting of nothing much at all, was relatively cheap, and perhaps by freeing up the girls' bedroom, a greater profit could be made by taking in more paying pupils to Steventon Rectory. Much as she loved her home, there is no notion that Jane was ever miserable at school – as long as she had Cassandra with her, she felt content.

'School' is something of a misnomer for the establishment that the girls first attended, for it was simply a widow (a connection by marriage of Mrs Austen) taking three or four girls into her own home, first in Oxford and then Southampton, in her own efforts to make ends meet. The Austens probably calculated that the girls could come to no harm, rather than that they would learn anything more than they might at home.



However, harm did come their way when they were struck down with a fever at Southampton. Mrs Austen and her sister Mrs Cooper rushed down to take their girls away – Mrs Cooper caught the fever and died.

For a while that was the end of schooling for Jane and Cassandra, but later they were sent to another, somewhat larger establishment in Reading. Perhaps the expense taxed the Austen coffers too much, for they did not stay more than eighteen months. By the time Jane was eleven, her formal education, such as it had been, was over, and she returned home to read what she liked from her father's extensive library, and in effect to educate herself. "I could die of laughing, as we used to say at school," is the one reference in her adult letters to her recollections of school, which makes it sound as if she had fun there, and

was relaxed with the other girls.

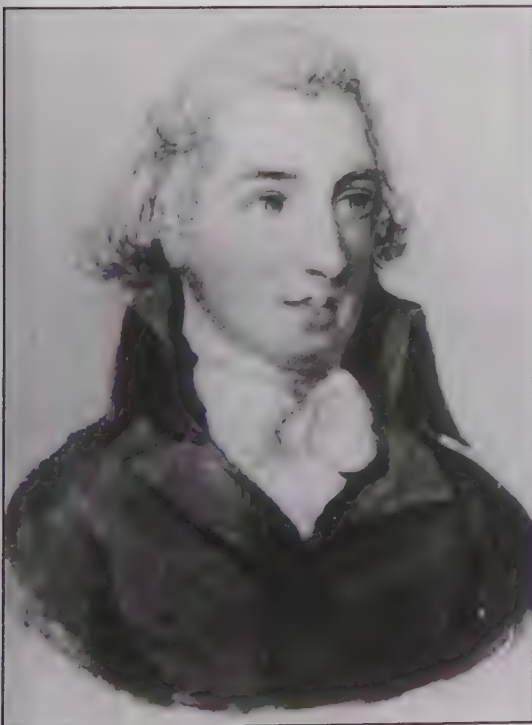
However, she did bring away with her an insight into the conditions endured by female teachers at such schools. "I would rather do anything than be a teacher at a school," she has one character say in her fragment *The Watsons*. "I have been at school, and know what a life they lead." And in her mature novel *Emma*, the three assistant teachers at Mrs Goddard's school, Miss Prince, Miss Richardson and Miss Nash, are wholly excluded from the social life of Highbury. Nobody has any interest in them; except for earning enough to feed and clothe themselves, their lives are effectively blank. It is a reminder of the dismal world of the Brontë sisters (also clergyman's daughters), which Jane herself, with her better family connections, knew she was lucky not to have to contemplate for herself.



A writing slope like that given to Jane by her father, which she could take with her wherever she travelled. Inside was room to keep her precious manuscripts safe from prying eyes. Jane's own writing slope may be seen at the British Library, London.



Brothers, friends and neighbours expanded the teenage Jane's world. The Austens were a sociable family in a sociable age, in which it was the custom for neighbours of a certain social standing to pay calls on one another by day, and join together for balls, parties and dinners by night.' As Mrs Bennet boasts in *Pride and Prejudice*, "I know we dine with four-and-twenty families". Jane and Cassandra were good friends with two families of sisters in particular, the three Lloyd sisters whose widowed mother was now renting the parsonage house at Deane, and the three Bigg sisters whose father was a gentleman of leisure with a fine house at Manydown, near Basingstoke. When Jane and Cassandra attended the monthly balls at the Basingstoke Assembly, they would stay the night at Manydown to avoid the



Jane's eldest and most literary brother, James. His academic abilities afforded him at place at Oxford at the tender age of fourteen.

long drive home by darkness – and to talk over the ball and their partners next morning, just as so many of her female characters do in the novels.

Grander balls were given from time to time by the two local landowners, Lord Bolton of Hackwood Park and Lord Portsmouth of Hurstbourne Park – the latter had in fact been briefly George Austen's pupil - and to these the Austens were invariably invited. One favourite neighbour of Jane's was Mrs Anne Lefroy, wife of the rector of nearby Ashe. She was an educated, polished woman, somewhat younger than Jane's own mother, and she seems to have taken up Jane as something of a protégé. Other neighbouring families – the Digweeds, the Holders, the Harwoods, the Bramstons – were more rustic. Everybody knew everybody else's quirks and foibles, just as Elizabeth Bennet knows those of her neighbours – to the observant Jane this was grist to the mill.

But it was her brothers, of course, who were truly important to Jane. The eldest, and undoubtedly Mrs Austen's favourite, was James. Taking easily to his father's tuition, he went up to Oxford at the early age of fourteen. With his academic abilities it was natural that his parents should design him for the church, in the hopes that a family living or two would be made available to him. Apart from his years at Oxford, James spent all his life in Hampshire – the only one of the brothers to do so. He was deeply attached to Steventon, and after a spell as his father's curate, eventually took over the living. James wrote poetry all his life, much of it about the countryside and seasons; other, more playful or tender poems, were addressed to his children and their animals.



While Jane was still quite a small child (she was ten years his junior), James was the instigator of amateur theatricals at Steventon. In summer one of his father's barns was transformed into a theatre, in winter the dining room was made to serve. It must have been great fun for the child Jane to watch.

James had an ardent, if reserved, temperament, and in his early twenties was always imagining himself in love, often with a woman who was socially out of reach. He eventually married Anne Mathew, a General's daughter, but she died within a few years of the marriage, leaving a little girl, Anna, who was sent to live at Steventon to be cared for by her grandmother and aunts, until James married again. After another round of amorous flirtations and unsuccessful pursuits he obtained the hand of family friend Mary Lloyd, by whom he had a son and a daughter, and to whom he became deeply devoted – somewhat to Jane's puzzlement, since she found Mary's nature difficult.

The next brother was George, of whom there is no mention in any of Jane's letters. In early childhood he suffered from fits, and was presumably mentally defective, since he was put out to lodge with a couple in a neighbouring village and remained there, financially provided for but – it would seem – wholly excluded from Austen family life, despite living into his seventies. Whether Jane had any contact with him we simply do not know. It is another of those odd episodes in the life of this otherwise affectionate and religious family, and we can only account



Edward

for it by supposing a different outlook in a different age.

The third Austen boy, Edward, was the most fortunate of them all in worldly terms, because as a youth he was adopted by rich childless relations, Thomas and Catherine Knight.

Thomas was the only son of Mr Austen's benefactor of the same name, and had since

inherited all his estates. Now the Knights proposed to make Edward their heir. It was an incredible piece of fortune for a third son, but thoroughly deserved in the sense that Edward was well-suited to the life of a country squire, having a good head for business and a benevolent attitude to all. He was taken by the Knights to live with them in Kent, where he married Elizabeth, daughter of a neighbouring landowner. His elevation was a piece of luck not only for himself but for all the family, especially after his father's death when he was able to contribute most to the support of his mother and sisters. But even before that, his homes in Kent – first a small house, Rowling, later the great estate of Godmersham itself – were pleasant places for other Austens to visit. Here the young Jane experienced life in the country house at a level of comfort and elegance that would not otherwise have come her way.

Edward eventually changed his surname to Knight, but this was not until after the death of poor Elizabeth, aged thirty-seven, in her eleventh childbirth. Edward's eldest child, Fanny – almost exactly of an age with her Hampshire cousin Anna, and in fact Jane's first niece – took her mother's place as mistress of the

household and little mother to her siblings at the age of sixteen. Despite the geographical distance between them, Jane was closer to Fanny even than Anna, calling her in a letter to Cassandra “almost another sister”.

The fourth son was Henry Thomas, born in 1771. Like James he was quick and clever at his lessons – like him he went up to Oxford and was destined by his parents for the church. But Henry had a very different temperament, often described as mercurial. He was a perpetual optimist – inheriting this trait from his father, no doubt. He and Jane shared a sense of humour, though it has to be said that his surviving writings have something of the Mr Collins about them, a mixture of servility and pomposity. They cannot have reflected his conversational style, or Jane would not have found him such good company.

Henry married a woman ten years older than himself – his first cousin Eliza de Feuillide, born Elizabeth Hancock, the worldly, sophisticated widow of a French count who had been guillotined in post-Revolutionary France. James Austen also briefly pursued (between wives) this most bewitching of cousins; but Eliza, like Mary Crawford, preferred city life to a country parsonage. Partly to woo her, partly to satisfy his own convivial nature,



*Henry Thomas*



*Frank*



*Charles*

Henry first joined the army and then set up as a banker in London. During Jane’s girlhood, Eliza’s visits had brought a taste of glamour and the excitement of a foreign culture to Steventon Rectory. Later, Henry and Eliza’s London home was to provide her with a foothold in the capital.

The two youngest brothers were Frank, who came between Cassandra and Jane in age, and Charles, the baby of the family, born three and a half years after Jane. Both proving to be sturdy, practical boys, a career at sea seemed to offer the best chance to make their way in the world. They were sent to Portsmouth Naval Academy and then to sea at an early age and were often away from home for long periods, enduring hardship and adventure. Frank was the more serious and correct of the two naval brothers, Charles the more engaging and cheerful. As they rose to be commanders of men, Frank was the disciplinarian while Charles’s men obeyed out of respect

and love. Devoted to each brother, Jane followed their voyages and promotional prospects with deep interest and developed an almost romantic attachment to the navy.

Britain was, of course, at war with France almost continuously from her late teens





*Godmersham Park, inherited from a distant cousin by Jane's brother Edward, who changed his surname to Knight. Jane experienced the comforts of country house living during several long visits here.*

and her brothers' involvement, together with her cousin Eliza's shocking experiences, bred in her a fervent patriotism. Coupled with the comforting certainties of the Church of England of the time, this underpinned the world view of the girl growing up in Steventon Rectory.

**W**hen a child or adolescent begins to write fiction, it usually takes the form of imitating what they have read. The results can be derivative and dull, apprentice pieces that are unreadable later.

Jane Austen was different from the

start. She began by ridiculing and burlesquing the fashionable novels of the day, with their reliance on high-flown sentiments and unrealistic events. From the start she found her own voice, amused, assured, astonishingly mature - and much more bawdy than the Jane Austen of the published novels.

For many young authors, writing is a private pleasure, but the teenage Jane had an audience for hers. Indulgent parents who were unashamedly "great novel-readers", a sympathetic sister and an assortment of clever brothers formed a fireside circle to whom she could read her early efforts and enjoy the resulting





laughter and applause. These fragments, now known as the *Juvenilia*, were transcribed and collected by her into three manuscript volumes, which she valued enough to preserve all her life. After more than two centuries, they still have the power to make us laugh.

As she progressed, her pieces lengthened and ceased to rely on nonsense and exaggeration for their humour, becoming increasingly grounded in the recognisable world. It was as if the characters she created began to take hold of her, and demand she take their destinies seriously. Now her wit and intelligence were trained on the human foibles of ordinary people and their everyday dilemmas.

By the time she was twenty-one, she

had written two full-length novels, *Elinor and Marianne*, a novel in letters about two sisters with differing outlooks on the world, and another that she called *First Impressions* because it was about a hero and heroine who disliked one another at first sight. Her family thought they were at least as good as anything then being published, and her father undertook to write to a publisher on her behalf, offering to send him the manuscript of a novel by an unnamed author. The offer was declined by return of post. The publisher in question, Thomas Cadell, was never to know that he had turned down the sight of *First Impressions*, which was one day to be published as *Pride and Prejudice*, perhaps the most perennially popular novel ever written.

## Burlesque

*As a writer, Jane Austen began by burlesquing the novels that were fashionable in her teenage years. That is to say, in little snippets written for her own and her family's amusement, she parodied or made fun of the sentimental literature of the 1790s.*

*In her youthful writings, characters swoon and die, fall in love at first sight, tell each other their life stories at the drop of a hat. All their feelings are exaggerated and most of their actions totally ridiculous. It is a world away from the finished novels, so believable they seem real to us - yet their wit and humour come from the same pen.*

*As well as the sentimental novel, the other popular genre when Jane was growing up was the Gothic tale, rather like the horror films of our own day. This she was to spoof to brilliant effect in *Northanger Abbey**





## Chapter Three

# The Wanderer

While she was still living at Steventon, Jane had made at least two visits to the fashionable spa resort of Bath in the county of Somerset. Her uncle and aunt Leigh Perrot had a house at 1 Paragon Buildings, where Jane and Cassandra stayed in November and December 1797. Jane was in Bath again for six weeks in May and June 1799, this time in company with her mother, her brother Edward and his wife Elizabeth, and their two eldest children Fanny and Edward, aged six and five. They took lodgings in Queen Square, which Jane enjoyed more than being under her aunt's roof.



*Mrs Leigh Perrot, Jane's aunt. Her husband was Mrs Austen's brother, and as a wealthy childless couple they owned a house in Bath as well as a country estate. In August 1799 Mrs Leigh Perrot was arrested in Bath and accused of stealing some lace trimming from a shop. Imprisoned for seven months in Ilchester gaol, she stood trial and was acquitted. It is thought that the shopkeepers had hoped to blackmail her.*



*1 Paragon Buildings, Bath, where Jane spent six weeks in 1797 with her Uncle and Aunt Leigh Perrot, whose winter home it was.*

On this occasion Jane, separated from her sister who remained with their father at Steventon, wrote a series of letters that we can read today. They paint a picture of a young woman enjoying all the pleasures that the city of Bath had to offer, from shopping to attending a concert with fireworks in Sydney Gardens.

At this date Bath was more popular than ever, with increasing numbers of visitors and residents filling the new terraces and crescents being built on the surrounding hills. If the place had largely been forsaken by the aristocracy, who had flocked there earlier in the century, it was

now increasingly the playground and meeting place of the minor gentry and the comfortably-off middling classes. It was still a place bound by rules and regulations; visitors signed the book in the Pump Room and were listed in the local newspaper; the two assembly rooms, at which balls were held on alternate nights, were ruled by their Masters of Ceremony, who introduced dancing partners to one another.

Bath had been founded as a health resort and a large number of people still went to Bath on that pretext, to drink or bathe in the hot, mineral waters and to take medical advice from one or more of the many doctors practising there. This indeed was the case with Jane's brother Edward, who had a temporary health problem, and with her uncle Leigh Perrot,

who chose to live in Bath for six months of every year in order to drink the waters twice a day. Very often there would be one invalid in a family party, who had been ordered to Bath for his or her health, while the rest tagged along for pleasure.

These two holidays in Bath inspired Jane's third novel, about a naïve country girl who comes to Bath and encounters a variety of characters and incidents. It was also a skit on the Gothic novels of the period, with their scenes of horror in castles and abbeys. Jane's heroine confuses what she reads in novels with real life and has to learn the difference between the two. She worked on the manuscript in the late 1790s and called it *Susan*, choosing as down-to-earth a name for her heroine as possible. In the story, Susan ends by rejecting both the superficial pleasures of

## *Crime and Punishment*

*During Jane Austen's lifetime the number of crimes which carried the death penalty rose from 160 to 225. The lawmakers were panicking at the rising crime rate brought on, for the most part, by destitution.*

*Anyone over the age of seven who was found guilty of one of these crimes, most of them petty, could be hanged. From 1778, when the penal colonies of Australia were founded, the sentence was often transmuted to transportation.*

*It is a quite extraordinary fact that Jane Austen's own aunt, the wealthy Mrs Leigh Perrot, was in 1800 arrested, gaoled for seven months on remand and tried for the theft from a Bath shop of lace worth one shilling (10p). Had she been found guilty she would certainly have been transported. Mrs Austen offered her daughters to support their aunt at the trial: this is how close Jane herself came to being witness to the brutal criminal justice system of her time.*



Bath and the imaginary fears of Northanger Abbey in favour of life in a country rectory with the hero. Jane liked Bath well enough as an occasional change from the country; but it was a different matter to have to live there permanently. This was the fate that befell her without warning when, in November 1800, her parents suddenly informed her that they had decided to retire to Bath. It seems that Jane and Cassandra had had no inkling that such an idea was in their parents' minds until the decision was announced. Both were horrified, but at twenty-five and twenty-eight respectively, they had no option but to live where their parents took them.

Among Mr and Mrs Austen's reasons for moving, it has been suggested, was the hope that in a city husbands might be forthcoming for Cassandra and Jane. Cassandra had, in fact, been engaged, to one of her father's former pupils, but he had died before they could marry. It had been a love match, and Cassandra seemed to withdraw from the marriage market for the rest of her life, regarding herself almost as a widow. Jane had had her flirtations, most notably with neighbour Mrs Lefroy's Irish nephew Tom, but as yet her heart had not been touched. Few young men could live up to the high standards of intelligence and amiability set by her own brothers, or prove attractive enough to draw her away from Cassandra. As a young girl Jane had fully expected to marry, but the years were drawing on and it now seemed less likely. She was pretty enough, tall and slim with curly brown hair, bright hazel eyes and red cheeks - like an animated doll, some thought. But she had no fortune to back up her attractions. If the sisters suspected their parents of harbouring secret hopes of



*4 Sydney Place, where Jane lived with her parents and sister Cassandra from September 1801 to September 1804. The Austens did not renew the lease, probably because it was beyond their means. Jane was not happy or settled here, and did little writing.*

this nature from Bath, this was even more reason for them to deplore the move.

But there were others. Both girls loved country life, the farm, the garden and the wider landscape. These they would deeply miss. They also preferred the settled social pattern of a village to the fluctuating population and petty snobberies of a town.

Mr and Mrs Austen, who shed a great deal of work and responsibility by the move, and fully deserved to spend their old age as they chose, heard no murmur of dissent from their daughters. Jane and Cassandra kept their thoughts to themselves, and as a matter of principle



*Tom Lefroy, nephew of a neighbouring family in Hampshire, with whom Jane enjoyed a brief youthful flirtation. Later, she turned down at least one proposal of marriage, and may have had a romantic but doomed encounter with an attractive stranger while on holiday.*

made the best of circumstances that they could not change. In May 1801 the family left Steventon Rectory, and James, still as his father's curate, moved into it with his wife and children.

After several weeks of house-hunting, during which time they encroached on the hospitality of Mr and Mrs Leigh Perrot, to Jane's discomfiture at least (she was sensitive to any hint of being patronised), the Austens signed a three-year lease on 4 Sydney Buildings. The house was less than ten years old and could not have been more

*To sit  
in idleness  
over a good fire in a  
well-proportioned  
room is a  
luxurious sensation*

*8 November 1800*

different from Steventon Rectory, being tall and narrow with five storeys. Above the first-floor double drawing-room divided by folding doors were two bedrooms, one shared by Jane and Cassandra, which was no hardship as they chose to share a bedroom wherever they lived. Visitors had to make do with the attics or a folding bed in Mr Austen's study on the ground floor.

At the front the house opened directly on to the pavement, and at the back there was little more than a courtyard. But the house was in a good location, with a level walk to the centre of town and just across the road from the welcome greenery of Sydney Gardens. They had looked at cheaper houses but rejected them as damp or cramped. But it is certain that the terms of Sydney Place were really beyond their means, as they did not renew the lease when it came up.





*The Sydney Hotel in Sydney Gardens, Bath's most elegant pleasure grounds. Jane attended a grand gala of music and fireworks here in June 1799 to mark the King's birthday.*



*Inside the Pump Room, Bath, in 1805 when Jane was living in the city. Here fashionable visitors and residents met for daytime socialising and to drink the warm water. Engraving by Nattes.*

Life at Steventon Rectory had been hard work - but cheap. Now for the first time they had to pay house rent, *and* purchase all their food from shops or markets, where once they had produced their own. Jane had probably never had to think much about money before, but now the reality of struggling to make a limited income stretch to all the elegancies of life could not help but creep up on her. And, if she looked to the future, as perhaps she now began to do, things could only get worse. A clerical income died with the clergyman. There was no provision for widow or children - and ladies could not earn their own living. It is highly probable that financial anxiety not only contributed to her dislike of Bath, but hampered the happy flow of her creativity. Her carefree childhood came to an end in Bath.

But Mr and Mrs Austen did not

appear to regret their decision, and were seen walking cheerfully about the streets of Bath arm-in-arm, he as handsome as ever at the age of seventy with his abundant snowy white hair. Bath was a city most appreciated in the winter, when its pavements would dry at the first hint of fine weather, when shops and libraries offered shelter and interest, and the programme of balls and concerts was underway. In summer the city could be not only insufferably hot and glaring, but smelly, as waste from shops, households and animals was not properly dealt with. Mr and Mrs Austen had foreseen this problem, and had built into their retirement plans the resolve to take long holidays at the seaside every year.

**I**n the early 1800s seaside resorts were in their infancy. It was really rather enterprising of the Austens, in their old



*Jane's first seaside holiday was spent in Sidmouth, east Devon, in 1801. Bathing machines and a rail for tethering horses can be seen in this print from 1810.*



age, to adopt this new habit. All along the south coast of England, little fishing villages and workaday ports were investing in attractions for the fashionable visitor - assembly rooms, libraries, paved walks, bathing huts on the beach, and new terraces of lodging-houses.

One of Mr Austen's ex-pupils was now Vicar of Colyton, just inland from the East Devon coast, and this determined the direction of their first holiday jaunt in 1801, for he invited them to visit him and his new wife. They probably spent most of their time in the pretty resort of Sidmouth nearby, and may also have visited Exmouth. In 1802 they were in Dawlish, on the other side of the River Exe, from where they almost certainly visited Teignmouth and Starcross. Unfortunately no letters from either holiday have come down to us, undoubtedly because Jane and Cassandra were always together, and we

have to pick up what hints we can from later correspondence.

According to family tradition, it was on one of these holidays that Jane met a man who was as attracted to her as she to him. Even Cassandra thought him good enough for her beloved sister, and marriage seemed likely. However, before they could meet again as arranged - further along the coast? in Bath? next year? accounts differ - news of his death reached them. We must not place too much reliance on these stories, which only surfaced decades after Jane's death, but it is possible that she did have this one meaningful romance.

We know for certain that shortly afterwards, Jane received a very eligible offer of marriage. Her suitor was Harris Bigg Wither, younger brother of her three friends Elizabeth, Catherine and Alethea Bigg, and heir to their home, Manydown Park, after their father's death. Harris was



*The nudity is probably imaginary in this satirical 1819 view by Cruickshank of bathing at Lyme!*



*Jane spent two happy holidays at Lyme Regis, in 1803 and 1804. She bathed in the sea, took long walks and danced at the Assembly Rooms. Persuasion draws on her fond memories of the Dorset coast. One of the most dramatic incidents in her fiction takes place on the Cobb (harbour wall).*

just twenty-one, while Jane, at the time of the proposal in November 1802, was approaching her twenty-seventh birthday. She and Cassandra were staying at Manydown when Harris proposed one evening - and Jane accepted him. Congratulations and happiness all round. The marriage promised her a comfortable home, relations whom she liked, security for the future .... but she did not feel for him what she knew a wife should feel for her husband. After a night of anguished deliberation she sought him out next morning and withdrew her acceptance. Ashamed of herself and of the hurt she had caused, she and Cassandra begged the use of the carriage and fled to Steventon, where they then asked James to escort

them back to Bath. It is good to report that her friendship with the sisters was not damaged, and that Harris married somebody else and had a large family.

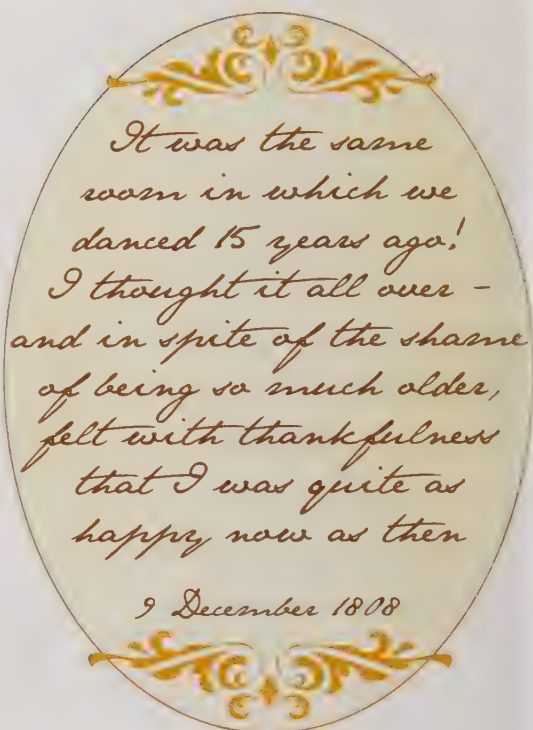
In 1803 the Austens' holiday destination was Lyme Regis, just inside the Dorset border, which they liked so well that they returned the following year, accompanied by Henry and Eliza. After some weeks together the party divided, Cassandra proceeding with Henry and Eliza to Weymouth, Jane remaining behind with her parents. As a consequence of this brief separation, we have one letter from Jane written in Lyme. It gives us a glimpse of a happy woman enjoying her holiday: bathing, walking, and dancing at the assembly rooms in the evening. There can



be no doubt that Jane Austen loved the coast: the sparkling sea, fresh air, picturesque cliffs and less stuffy way of life. These holidays made the Bath years tolerable.

There are no surviving letters from Jane at 4 Sydney Place, but one family manuscript from that period has come down to us: a comic yet poignant poem by her mother. Mrs Austen suffered a severe illness from which, for a while, her life was in danger. Referring briskly to herself as "an old madam here at No.4," she attributes her recovery to "the prayers of my husband, whose love I possess / the care of my daughters, whom heaven will bless / the skill and attention of Bowen". Mr Bowen was the family's doctor.

Jane's novel-writing had almost dried up. In 1802 she had thought for a while that at last she was on her way to becoming a published novelist, when the publisher Richard Crosby paid her £10 for the copyright of *Susan*. For many months she must have lived in hope of



holding her own printed novel in her hands, but hope gradually faded when the book failed to appear. Presumably Crosby calculated that he would not recoup his costs, but his inaction is certainly mystifying. In Bath Jane started a new novel, the fragment known to us as *The Watsons*, but for one reason or another she laid it aside. It has been suggested that its basic plotline - a family of unmarried sisters left homeless when their clergyman father dies - was too near her own situation for comfort.

For Mr Austen did die, after a very short illness, in January 1805. The family had already moved out of 4 Sydney Place and into a cheaper house at Green Park Buildings, down by the river, from where Jane wrote to inform Frank, at sea, of their father's sudden death: "his



Green Park Buildings near the river

## *The City of Bath*

*The heyday of Bath as a fashionable resort was the middle of the eighteenth century, when Jane's mother was living in the city as a young woman. The nobility and anybody who had made it in the world of arts or politics flocked to take the waters, to see and be seen. With them came a ragamuffin bunch of hangers-on, fortune-hunters and marriage-partner hopefuls.*

*By Jane Austen's time the place was much bigger, with many more visitors, and it was becoming more sedate and middle-class. Towards the end of her life it had become the place where impoverished gentry like Sir Walter Elliot of Persuasion went to live economically.*

*A real-life example was the novelist Fanny Burney, who with her invalid husband General d'Arblay retired to Bath along with many military and naval families after the end of the Napoleonic wars, to scrape along on a pittance. Another category of resident was the unattached woman, either widow or spinster, which gave the city a drearily respectable and increasingly down-at-heel air.*

tenderness as a father, who can do justice to?" The Reverend George Austen was buried at St Swithin's church, Walcot, the same church (although rebuilt) where he had married forty years before.

Mrs Austen had a very small amount of money of her own; Cassandra had inherited one thousand pounds from her fiancé; Jane had nothing. The trio of women could not have survived had the brothers not come to their rescue. James, Henry and Frank pledged £50 a year apiece out of their own incomes, to which the richer Edward added £100. Charles wanted to pay his share, but was not earning enough, and his brothers would not allow it. Henry, the optimist, thought

his mother and sisters would be "full as rich as ever" but Jane for one was uncomfortable at being dependent on her brothers, most of whom had large and growing families of their own. The three women left Green Park Buildings in the Spring and then took, not a whole house, but rooms, first in Gay Street and later in Trim Street. Insecure, unsettled, hating Bath more and more as she sank to one of the growing number of shabby genteel spinsters who were seeing out their days there, this was the nadir of Jane's life, and she could see no way out of it.

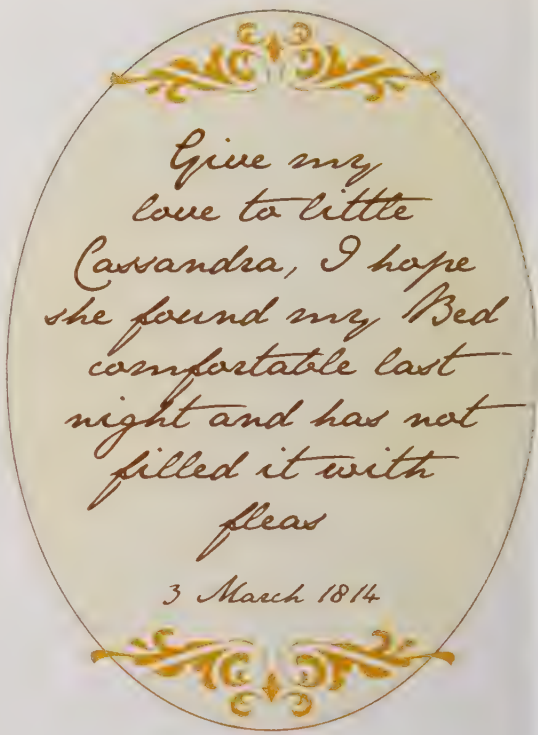


## Chapter Four

# "Our Chawton Home"

"It is two years tomorrow since we left Bath for Clifton - with what happy feelings of escape!" Jane reminded Cassandra on 1st July 1808. It turned out that Bath was not for ever after all. Frank Austen, after narrowly missing being part of the Trafalgar action in October 1805 (much to his disappointment), was preparing for his marriage to Mary Gibson, whom he had met and wooed at Ramsgate in 1803. The young couple had not a great deal of money, and it was obvious that Frank would have to be away from his young wife, and possible young children, as he pursued his career at sea. It made sense all round for the two households to amalgamate, sharing expenses and giving Mary company and support during his absence. The Austen women had already invited their old friend Martha Lloyd, whose own mother died in April 1805, to join them. Now the five women and Frank agreed to take the lease of a house together, Southampton being their chosen location.

But first Mrs Austen, Cassandra and Jane took the opportunity to pay some family visits. Mrs Austen wanted to see her cousins Thomas and Mary Leigh, living in her old grandparents' house at Adlestrop in Gloucestershire, where they had employed Humphry Repton to remodel the grounds. En route to Adlestrop they spent some time at Clifton, just outside Bristol, though where they stayed is not known. While they were at Adlestrop, news came that Mr Leigh had inherited



*Give my  
love to little  
Cassandra, I hope  
she found my Bed  
comfortable last  
night and has not  
filled it with  
fleas*

*3 March 1814*

Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire, but as the inheritance was disputable, owing to the terms of the late Lord Leigh's will, he had to take possession fast. So off he set for Stoneleigh, taking his three Austen relations with him. It was an enormously grand house, with an internal chapel entered from above - just like the one Jane was to describe in *Mansfield Park*.

From Warwickshire they continued to Staffordshire, where Mrs Austen's nephew Edward Cooper was rector of Hamstall Ridware. They stayed six weeks there, and Jane caught whooping cough from the Cooper children. This was the furthest north that she ever travelled; there is absolutely no evidence that she was ever in Derbyshire, despite setting part of *Pride and Prejudice* there.

The Austens made the long journey south by stages, the last one of which was



*Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire had been the home of the Leighs, Jane's mother's family, for generations, and they had built a vast mansion on to the remains of the medieval abbey. Jane, her mother and sister visited in 1806, in company with its new owner, Mrs Austen's cousin Thomas Leigh.*







*Southampton, pictured in 1810. Jane Austen lived here from the autumn of 1806 to the spring of 1809, in a household of five women and one man (her brother Frank). Southampton's proximity to the water made amends to her for living yet again in a town.*

Steventon, until they reached Southampton, where they went into temporary lodgings. At first Jane was no more settled than she had been in Bath, but she relaxed considerably when the following February they found a suitable house to rent in Castle Square. Part of its charm lay in a neglected garden bordered by the city ramparts, and restoring it to fruitfulness and beauty became an absorbing project. Castle Square no longer exists, and the city of Southampton has grown beyond all recognition, but in the Austens' time it was considerably smaller than Bath, and of course had the attraction for Jane of being on the coast.

Mrs Austen liked living with one son, Frank, and being not far from another, James, not to mention her growing number of grandchildren. Edward's eldest sons

were at school in Winchester, and there was a satisfying sense of the extended family consolidating and growing up around them. Even Henry had business connections in the county, having set up a small local bank in Alton in 1806 with partners Vincent and Gray. Serving the local brewing and farming community, it was one of four such country banks that operated in alliance with his London bank, as was the practice of the times. It brought him often into Hampshire.

Alton is only a mile from Chawton, the village where Edward owned the manor house and most of the surrounding property as one of the three estates he had inherited from Thomas Knight. In the summer of 1807, Chawton Manor, which was normally let, happened to be vacant between tenancies. Edward decided to



bring his family for a long visit, and invited his mother and sisters to join them, together with the family from Steventon. Chawton House was (and is) a large rambling old-fashioned house, very different from the elegance of Godmersham, and there was plenty of room for all. This was Jane's first experience of the village that was to mean so much to her. During her eleven days there at the beginning of September, she walked to Alton several times with Fanny, and must have passed the cottage that would see her genius flourish quite unconscious of its future importance in her life.

Edward's wife Elizabeth died suddenly and tragically the following October, a few days after the birth of her eleventh child. Cassandra

was staying at Godmersham to help out with the birth, and anguished letters passed between Kent and Southampton.

The household in Southampton was breaking up, amicably enough. Frank and Mary wanted a home of their own on the Isle of Wight, and Mrs Austen, encouraged by James and Henry, was thinking that Alton might suit her. But now Edward came forward with the offer of the substantial detached cottage lately occupied by his Chawton steward - and to make the proposal perfect, it was to come rent-free, with firewood from the estate thrown in.

Edward undertook to make the house comfortable for a family of ladies. They were to leave Southampton in April 1809, pay some more family visits, and settle at Chawton in July. "Our Chawton home, how much we find / Already in it to our mind / And how convinced, that when



*Chawton House, inherited together with two other estates by Jane's brother Edward. He never lived here permanently, but used it occasionally for holidays or let it to one of his brothers. During these periods it became very familiar to Jane. Now the home of Chawton House Library, a resource centre for the study of early English women's writing.*



*Jane Austen's beloved home at Chawton, Hampshire. Here she lived from 1809 to 1817, revising her three early novels and writing Mansfield Park, Emma and Persuasion in an intense burst of creativity. Known familiarly as Chawton Cottage, it is officially the Jane Austen House Museum. Open to the public, it contains many items relating to Jane and her family.*

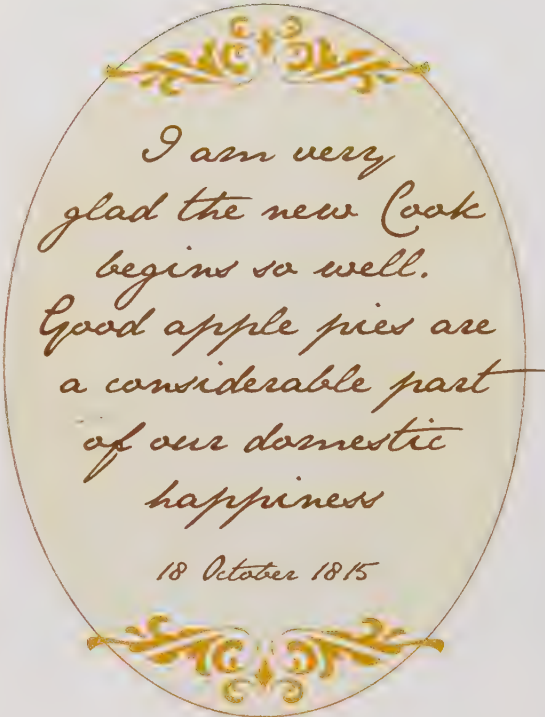
complete / It will all other houses beat /  
That ever have been made or mended /  
With rooms concise or rooms distended,"  
wrote Jane to Frank, in one of her rare  
forays into doggerel - proof of the  
immediate lifting of her spirits as she  
contemplated life in the country again.

The cottage was about a hundred years  
old and, standing at the junction of three  
roads by the village pond, had once been  
used as an inn. There was a central front  
door with a room either side, their  
windows rather close to the road. The  
biggest change that Edward made was to  
have one of these windows blocked up, for  
privacy, and a new opening made at the  
side of the house, so that the principal  
sitting-room had a pleasant view over the  
garden. This window, with its pretty  
gothic glazing bars, was in the latest

fashion, out of keeping really with the rest  
of the house, and of course the act of  
blocking up spoilt the symmetry of the  
frontage. Such changes would never be  
permitted today! Luckily for the Austens,  
Edward could do what he liked with his  
own property, and a comfortable home  
was the result. The dining room window  
could not be made to face anywhere but  
the road, but as it happened Mrs Austen  
enjoyed watching the passers-by.

Jane and Cassandra shared a bedroom  
again, Martha was still with them, but  
there were sufficient rooms to house  
visiting family, and attics for the servants.  
The garden was made productive, and  
there were outbuildings for every purpose -  
a wash-house, a bake-house, etc.  
Cassandra took over the housekeeping  
duties from her mother, who kept active by





*I am very  
glad the new Cook  
begins so well.  
Good apple pies are  
a considerable part  
of our domestic  
happiness*

*18 October 1815*

gardening, knitting and sewing. Jane's household duty was to make the breakfast - tea and toast cooked over the dining-room fire. By agreement with Cassandra, it left her free to devote the main part of the day to writing.

Jane had invested in a piano, ostensibly to provide entertainment for visiting nephews and nieces. As the ladies of the cottage settled into the routines that were to serve them well over the coming years, Jane developed the habit of practising every morning before the rest of the family came downstairs. As she played over the simple tunes in her music book, her mind was free to range over scenes and sentences that would form part of the day's writing ahead.

The sisters often walked into the market town of Alton, just a mile distant, for a little shopping. They were on friendly

terms with their neighbours, but had neither the wish nor the means to indulge in much social life - family supplied all their wants. Henry was frequently required to visit Alton, and later Frank would find it a convenient place to rent a house. James was just a dozen miles away. For the time being Chawton Manor was tenanted again, but with his mother and sisters settled in the village, there were hopes that Edward would use it for family holidays when the lease expired. The "Hampshire-born Austens", as Jane called herself and her siblings, now looked to Chawton as the centre of their family life.

Nephews and nieces were now arriving thick and fast - two dozen of them in Jane's lifetime, and she took an interest in them all. Edward changed his name to Knight in 1812, on the death of old Mrs Knight, and his children likewise. Frank's family was growing rapidly, and Charles had found a young bride in Bermuda and had brought her home with their three little girls. Only James's children had inherited the family's literary bent, all three sending their youthful efforts to Aunt Jane for her opinion and advice. For Aunt Jane was now a published novelist - at last.

At Chawton Cottage, as it has become known to millions of Austen fans, Jane had the peace, contentment and time to nurture her gift. The remarkable thing is that she instinctively understood that her writing would flourish there, even before she moved in. While still at Southampton, in the early months of 1809, she did something which indicates a new resolve to get her work published. She wrote to the publisher Crosby, enquiring why *Susan* had never been published, offering to supply

another copy of the manuscript if it had been lost, and saying she would hold herself free to seek another publisher if he had no intention of publishing. She signed herself "Mrs Ashton Dennis," which as commentators have pointed out, makes the initials MAD. The reply she received was unsatisfactory - Crosby threatened to take action if she published elsewhere, and offered to sell back the copyright for the sum he had paid. Jane evidently did not have £10 to spare as she let the matter drop.

But almost as soon as she was settled at Chawton, it would seem that she took out her other two manuscripts and set about revising them with a new determination to get them published. We know nothing of this process of revision, as all manuscript versions of these early



Lizzy and Marianne Austen (later Knight), two of brother Edward's eleven children. Jane was fond of her many nephews and nieces; watching them grow up added to the pleasures of her later life. She was remembered by them all as a delightful aunt and letters to several of them have been preserved.



Caroline, younger daughter of James Austen. Like her sister Anna and brother Edward she tried her hand at fiction in childhood and submitted her attempts to Jane, whose responses tell us much about her own approach to novel-writing. In old age Caroline, who never married, wrote down her recollections of her Aunt Jane.

novels are lost. All we know is that *Sense and Sensibility* (based on *Elinor and Marianne*) was published by the firm of Thomas Egerton in October 1811 and *Pride and Prejudice*, formerly *First Impressions*, in January 1813.

Jane's delight in these developments is clear from her letters. In London to see *Sense and Sensibility* through the press, she responded to Cassandra's query, "No, indeed, I am never too busy to think of S&S. I can no more forget it, than a mother can forget her sucking child," - a remark, incidentally, that proves her to be



## *Publishing for Beginners*

Jane's publishing breakthrough came just after her thirty-fifth birthday, at the end of 1810, when her soldier-turned-banker brother Henry brokered a deal with the firm of Thomas Egerton, chiefly known for his Military Library.

Obviously, Jane's novel did not fit into this category, nor was Egerton particularly won over by *Sense and Sensibility's* merits! He simply agreed to print and distribute the book, at the author's expense, risking nothing himself; she would keep the copyright and any profits. Henry almost certainly advanced the money, or had it set aside in case of loss, though by 1813 Jane had in fact made a net profit on this title of £140.

For *Pride and Prejudice* there was to be a different arrangement. Egerton now judged that he had a successful author on his hands, and offered to purchase the copyright upfront. Jane accepted his offer of £110, though it was less than she had made from *Sense and Sensibility*. She took this step to save Henry trouble, but it is sad to think that this was all the money she was ever to make from her best-loved novel!

more robust Georgian than refined Victorian. She used the same maternal imagery when she called *Pride and Prejudice* "my own darling Child," adding of her heroine, "I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her*, at least, I do not know". (She need not have worried - from her first readers to the present day, everybody falls for the charm, intelligence and spirit of Elizabeth Bennet.)

Jane Austen found it extremely useful to be able to stay with Henry in London while dealing with printers and proofs. Henry had been instrumental in agreeing terms with Thomas Egerton, and later with Jane's second publisher, the more prestigious John Murray, publisher of Byron and Scott.

Certainly it was Henry who some years later paid a visit to Richard Crosby, handed over £10 in exchange for the manuscript of *Susan*, and then had the very great satisfaction of informing him that he had just relinquished the chance to publish the author of *Pride and Prejudice*!

Her creative gift had not deserted her - it had just lain dormant until conditions were right. In February 1811 she began work on a wholly new novel, her first new creation since at least 1804 (*The Watsons*) and the first she had carried through to completion since the late 1790s. *Mansfield Park* is the work of a mature woman, both in tone and technique. Much that Jane Austen had experienced, observed, felt and thought in those long fallow years between her carefree youth and the poise of her

middle years is reflected in this novel. She finished writing it in June 1813, having seen *Pride and Prejudice* through the press simultaneously.

No two heroines could be more different than Elizabeth Bennet and Fanny Price, but each is given the appropriate milieu and story to test her mettle. Jane was concerned that those who had loved the "light and bright and sparkling" character of *Pride and Prejudice* would find *Mansfield Park* too sombre, and indeed some readers do, but this first novel of her maturity has a level of artistic control beyond anything she had previously achieved, as well as great tenderness in the handling of the young Fanny's sufferings.

*Mansfield Park* was published in May 1814. Meanwhile in January of that year Jane began to invent and write about

another wholly different set of characters and small-town setting which she called *Emma*. Famously, she said that this time she was going "to take a heroine whom no-one but myself will much like," though almost all readers do like vain, wilful, fallible yet lovable Emma Woodhouse very much. In this novel the author demonstrates how even the quietest and most uneventful of narratives can amount to a portrait of society so realistic that readers feel part of it. A second reading reveals how clever Jane has been in burying clues that neither the reader, nor Emma herself, pick up. It has been called the first detective story.

This is an author writing at the height of her confidence and power. *Emma* was published by John Murray in December 1815, just as Jane Austen turned forty.

## *The Royal Navy*

*Only one of Jane Austen's heroes is neither a landowner nor a clergyman: the sailor Captain Wentworth of Persuasion. He is presented as courageous, capable and rich, having made £20,000 in eight years' warfare.*

*Jane Austen admired naval officers for their endurance of hardship, their bravery and comradeship, qualities which she observed in her own sailor brothers. In the Royal Navy, penniless young men could advance on their own merits to make personal fortunes, especially in times of war. When an enemy vessel was captured, prize money was distributed among the crew according to rank, the captain receiving one quarter.*

*But the life of the ordinary seaman - who had often been forced to enlist - held few rewards. Rations were monotonous, dysentery was a frequent misery, and flogging was commonplace. During the naval wars of Jane Austen's lifetime, of the hundred thousand sailors who perished, only seven per cent was by enemy action, thirteen per cent by shipwreck, twenty per cent by accident on board, and sixty per cent by disease. The greatest killer was typhus, spread by lice among men living at close quarters.*



## Chapter Five

# “If I live to be an old woman”

The summer of 1809 to that of 1814 saw Jane Austen at the peak of fulfilment and happiness.

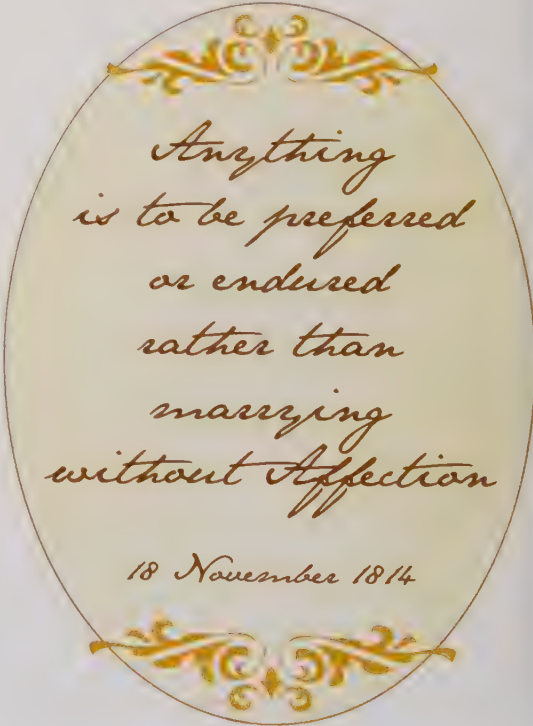
Everything went right for her during these years. She earned a little money - not much, but enough to make her glad. “I like Praise as much as anybody - but I like what Edward calls Pewter too,” she remarked humorously of people who were more inclined to borrow than to buy her books. She did not spend her money but put it aside for her old age, in case the brothers could no longer keep her and Cassandra. She knew that nothing is certain in this world.

From the autumn of 1814 a series of setbacks in the Austen family began to chip away at the charmed life that had been hers for five years. Success and enjoyment did not immediately cease, but the brief remainder of her time on earth was to witness a sequence of troubles and, eventually, a heartbreaking decline in her own powers and health.

Ushering in the family sorrows was the loss of Charles Austen’s wife in childbirth in September 1814 - the fourth of Jane’s sisters-in-law to die. Three little girls were left motherless, and Charles himself was devastated. Within a month, further troubles struck in the form of a lawsuit against Edward Knight, challenging his right to inherit his two Hampshire estates. This dragged on for years, and the outcome was by no means certain. If he lost, not only would his own large family be impoverished by almost two thirds of his

income, but his mother’s tenure of the Cottage would be a casualty. The happy, Chawton-centred existence that had been so good for Jane could unravel. From this date it must have been a worry always at the back of her mind.

When *Emma* was published Jane already had a new work in hand, having begun to write the novel that we know as *Persuasion* in August 1815. The third of her Chawton-created novels, it is a new departure in several ways. The heroine, Anne Elliot is all of twenty-seven years of age - none of Jane Austen’s heroines has been older than twenty-one before. Anne has wisdom, gentleness and self-deprecation which come not only from her increased years but from a sad back-story. She could almost be Cassandra Austen, with the difference that her fiancé is estranged from her, not dead. This is a novel about second chances and enduring love.



Anything  
is to be preferred  
or endured  
rather than  
marrying  
without Affection

18 November 1814



"Oh God! her father and mother!"  
Chapter *XII*



*Acting seldom  
satisfied me.  
I took two Pocket  
Handkerchiefs,  
but had very little  
occasion for either*

*29 November 1814*

It is also very much a novel about *places* and *seasons*. After the opening chapters set in the country when the beautifully-rendered autumnal tone echoes the heroine's view of her own declining prospects, the narrative moves first to Lyme Regis and then to Bath. The scenery and invigorating sea breezes of Lyme, that had so delighted Jane during her two holidays there, are described with relish. Formal, stultifying Bath forms a complete contrast. It was nine years since Jane Austen had seen Bath, but in 1814 both her friend Martha Lloyd, and her niece Fanny Knight, had stayed there, perhaps inspiring Jane to revisit the city in her imagination.

*Persuasion* starts promisingly with hints of plot, characters and settings to sustain a novel in three volumes like *Mansfield Park* or *Emma*, but it was not to work out that way. Jane's concentration was interrupted

by a series of worrying events, and the novel suffered. She was staying with Henry in October to see *Emma* through the press when he became so ill that his life seemed to be in danger; alarmed, she sent express messages to James, Edward and Cassandra and they all hastened to his bedside. Happily Henry recovered, but Jane stayed on to nurse him through a slow recuperation. (His wife Eliza had died some two years previously.) In his weakened state Henry could hardly have concealed from the brothers and sisters gathered in his home the financial worries which were beginning to press in on him, and Jane returned to Chawton with these preying on her mind.

In the new year, her own health began to give alarm. She felt herself to be growing weaker; we now believe that it was either the beginnings of Addison's disease, a malfunction of the adrenal glands, or possibly a lymphoma. She found herself unable to walk so far as Alton, and a donkey carriage was purchased for her to ride in. Humble though it was, this was the first time she had had any means of



First edition of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, published together in a four volume set shortly after Jane's death. It is thought that brother Henry chose the titles.

## *Jane Austen's Illness*

*Until the last eighteen months or so of her life, Jane Austen seems to have been healthy and energetic - she enjoyed taking long walks, dancing and sea-bathing. She recovered from a "putrid fever" caught at school in Southampton, and from whooping cough when she was thirty.*

*In 1813 she suffered for several weeks from pain in her face, which was bad enough to make her avoid exposure to the night air. But it was early in 1816 that she began to notice bodily weakness, curtailing her walks until eventually she was confined to her room. Other symptoms she reported in letters to friends were biliousness, an unspecified discharge, and skin discolouration. She had periods of remission when she hoped she was getting better, but emotional stress of any kind made her worse.*

*It is impossible to diagnose accurately at the distance of two hundred years and on the basis of a few letters. But it has been suggested that her complaint was either Addison's disease (tuberculosis of the adrenal glands) or Hodgkin's disease, a lymphatic cancer. Today, both would be amenable to medication, but then, death was inevitable.*

transport at her disposal - she had always been so dependent on her brothers for taking her anywhere.

Disasters continued to mount - the Austens were truly in for a run of bad luck. In February 1816, HMS *Phoenix*, under the command of Captain Charles Austen, was shipwrecked off the Greek coast. All crew were saved, but it was a serious matter to lose one of His Majesty's ships, and the commanding officer was always court-martialled in such circumstances. Although Charles was to be totally exonerated, the loss of a vessel on his record did not do his career any good - especially now that peace had arrived. His long-term prospects of employment were bleak.

Then, in March 1816, the family sustained their greatest blow in the failure

of Henry's bank. Not only were his own livelihood and assets wiped out at a stroke, but many members of the family lost considerable sums - James and Frank hundreds of pounds, Edward and Uncle James Leigh Perrot many thousands, for they had stood surety for Henry's government post as Receiver-General for Oxfordshire, and £44,000 was outstanding to the Crown. Henry was said not to be at fault in any way, and none of his brothers upbraided him, but there were murmurs of discontent from Mrs Leigh Perrot, despite her husband's great wealth. Edward, of course, still had the lawsuit hanging over him - he was to end up paying £15,000 two years later to buy off the threat. Though Frank's losses were less, they represented all the prize money he had gained, and





*8 College Street, Winchester. Here Jane and Cassandra took lodgings in May 1817 so that she could have better medical attention than in a village, and here she died on 18 July. From the first floor bay window Cassandra watched her beloved sister's hearse until it was out of sight. Women did not usually attend funerals at that date.*

were a serious setback for him, especially now he was living on half-pay of £200 a year as a result of the peace. Frank could no longer afford to pay his mother, and of course, neither could Henry. This was a blow for the women at Chawton Cottage, quite apart from their distress on the men's behalf.

Fortunately, their own small capital sums, including Jane's nest-egg of £600, were safely invested in navy bonds. But even Jane lost just over £25 in her bank account.

Henry himself, aged forty-five, had to begin anew. Under the rules of bankruptcy then, he was allowed to keep just three per cent of his personal wealth - hardly more

than the clothes he stood up in. He was without home or livelihood and did the rounds of his relations. Within months he had decided to become ordained, and by the end of the year he was appointed to the curacy of Chawton at just 50 guineas a year - and no rectory for him to occupy, as he was only the curate. It was a huge come-down for the man who had lived a comfortable life in London with a smartly furnished house and luxurious wine cellar, now all forfeited to pay his debts. But he remained cheerful, and optimistic that with his contacts, he would gain preferment in the church.

There can be no doubt that financial worry exacerbated Jane's illness. In May she and Cassandra stayed for a fortnight in

Cheltenham to take the waters in the vain hope of a cure. (She would not go near *Bath* again.) In August, back in Chawton, she brought *Persuasion* (as yet unnamed) to a conclusion one year after beginning it. But though ostensibly finished, she did not send it for publication. By her own high standards, she knew she had not done justice to her original conception. The novel is full of beauties, but some of the comic characters are not developed, and the denouement feels skimpy.

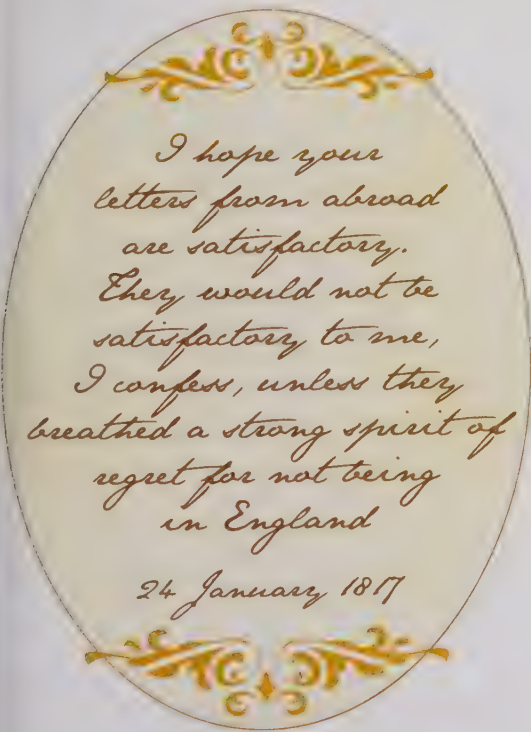
Unable perhaps to face the revision she knew it deserved, in January 1817 she refreshed her spirits by beginning a new novel, set in an imaginary seaside resort, which she called Sanditon. One of the targets of her mockery in the few chapters she completed is hypochondria, and there are some amusing character sketches. But the fragment has puzzled critics, as it is more like the juvenilia than the mature

novels in tone. Was she perhaps, just writing it to amuse herself? When she could no longer hold a pen, she continued for a while in pencil, and then gave up altogether.

In March that year her uncle James Leigh Perrot died, and with the reading of the Will, the family had to bear another disappointment. The Leigh Perrots were childless, and James Austen had always been considered their heir. Moreover, it had been hoped by her sons that Mrs Austen, as James Leigh Perrot's only sister, would be left sufficient to make her comfortable in old age. A very small fraction of his wealth would do. Brother and sister had always been fond of one another, and the wonder is that he had not made her a small allowance even in his lifetime. Now it transpired that everything had been left to his wife, who was at liberty to bequeath the estate as she chose, with the proviso that at her death (which in fact did not take place for another twenty years) any surviving Austen brothers and sisters receive £1,000 apiece. So there was no immediate good to any of them, and Mrs Austen was not mentioned at all. It was hurtful, as well as desperately disappointing.

Jane, in her weakened state of health, was the least able to bear up. She wrote to her brother Charles, "I am ashamed to say that the shock of my Uncle's Will brought on a relapse.... I live upstairs however for the present & am coddled. I am the only one of the Legatees who has been so silly, but a weak Body must excuse weak nerves."

At the end of April Jane made her own Will, leaving everything to Cassandra with the exception of two bequests of £50, one to Henry - who had done so much to help



*I hope your  
letters from abroad  
are satisfactory.  
They would not be  
satisfactory to me,  
I confess, unless they  
breathed a strong spirit of  
regret for not being  
in England*

*24 January 1817*



her get her books published, and who was now so much in need of money - and the other to Henry's erstwhile French housekeeper, Mme Bigeon, who had lost all her savings in the crash, as well, of course, as her job. This sympathy and practical help for a servant is proof, if proof be needed, of Jane Austen's humane, unsnobbish and unshowy practice of the Christian values she had tried to live by.

One of her dear friends had long been Miss Anne Sharp, formerly governess at Godmērsham, and now working in Doncaster. Jane wrote to her on 22 May, describing her relapses and recoveries. "How to do justice to the kindness of all my family during this illness, is quite beyond me! Every dear Brother so affectionate and anxious - And as for my Sister! Words must fail me in any attempt to describe what a Nurse she has been to me!" After writing on other subjects she adds, "I have not mentioned my dear Mother; she suffered much for me when I was at the worst.... In short, if I live to be an old Woman I must expect to wish I had died now, blessed in the tenderness of such a Family, & before I had survived either them or their affection".

Mr Curtis, the doctor from Alton, could do no more for her and Mr Lyford of Winchester was called in. (Of course, this all cost money - illness was an expensive indulgence for people on a tight budget.) As his treatment had some effect it was decided that instead of going to London to seek better medical advice, as she had been on the point of doing, Jane would go to Winchester to be under his care. Lodgings were taken for her and Cassandra and on 24 May they travelled the sixteen miles in James Austen's carriage, escorted on horseback by Henry

and one of Edward's sons, William Knight. It distressed Jane to see them getting wet in the rain, but otherwise she had a good journey, and was pleased with their lodgings in College Street, where a little bay window on the first floor (which can still be seen) overlooks what was then the Headmaster's garden. But her decline continued, and she died in Cassandra's arms in the early morning of 18 July 1817, aged forty-one and a half.

She was buried beneath the north aisle of Winchester Cathedral - it is thought that Henry must have pulled some strings to secure for her this honour. Cassandra, writing to niece Fanny immediately after the death, said that she thought Jane would be pleased to lie in a building she admired so much. Emotionally exhausted, Cassandra was submitting to Henry's stronger will; a quiet grave in Chawton village churchyard would surely have been the wish of both sisters, where Cassandra could visit as often as she liked, and where Jane would one day be joined by both her mother and sister (the two Cassandras' graves lie side by side, and can be visited today). Henry was doubtless also the author of the very elaborate wording on the memorial stone covering his sister's body, in which she is eulogised for many virtues, but no mention is made of her novels.

Two complete manuscripts remained unpublished at her death, and Henry saw them through the press at the end of that year. Jane had already been through the old *Susan* renaming the heroine Catherine, as another novel of that name had been published in the interim. Now, Henry chose for it the title *Northanger Abbey*. He also dreamt up *Persuasion*, for which Jane

In Memory of  
**JANE AUSTEN,**  
youngest daughter of the late  
**Rev<sup>d</sup> GEORGE AUSTEN,**  
formerly Rector of Steventon in this County  
she departed this Life on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 1817  
aged 41, after a long illness supported with  
the patience and the hopes of a Christian.

The benevolence of her heart,  
the sweetness of her temper, and  
the extraordinary endowments of her mind  
obtained the regard of all who knew her, and  
the warmest love of her intimate connections.

Their grief is in proportion to their affection  
they know their loss to be irreparable,  
but in their deepest affliction they are consoled  
by a firm though humble hope that her charity,  
devotion, faith, and purity, have rendered  
her soul acceptable in the sight of her

**REDEEMER.**

*Jane Austen's gravestone in the floor of the North Aisle of Winchester Cathedral, now a place of pilgrimage for thousands of readers. Henry Austen probably composed the epitaph, which makes no mention of the novels.*

had just the working title '*The Elliots*'. Both manuscripts being short, they were published as a four-volume set - Jane's four other novels had been published in three volumes apiece. Though almost two decades separated the composition of these

two posthumous novels, they are united by each happening to be set partly in Bath.

Henry also composed a 'Biographical Notice' as a forward to the set - chiefly praising his sister's piety and ladylike demeanour - suggesting that she did not



write for money, and that a sharp word never escaped her lips, two assertions we no longer believe! The name 'Jane Austen' appeared in Henry's notice, the first time it had been acknowledged in her books.

She was the first of her parents' children to die; James, already in weak health himself, died just two years later (and Henry moved in to Steventon Rectory to keep the living warm for the young William Knight) but the others lived into their seventies, eighties and even nineties. Henry went on to become a schoolmaster as well as a clergyman and some of his sermons were published. Both Frank and Charles, after some decades of enforced inaction, rose to the rank of Admiral; they and Henry all took second wives, and of course the number of Austen descendants continued to grow and grow.

Mrs Austen outlived Jane by ten years, once remarking to a visiting grandson, "Ah, my dear, you find me just where you left me - on the sofa. I sometimes think that God Almighty must have forgotten me; but I dare say He will come for me in His own good time."

Cassandra lived to become a Victorian old lady in a black satin bonnet and cloak, keeping Jane's memory alive by talking about her to her nieces and great-nieces, some of whom recorded snippets of what they remembered in their own old age. James Edward Austen Leigh, James's son, who added Leigh to his name when he eventually inherited from Mrs Leigh Perrot, wrote the first biography of Jane Austen in 1869, the *Memoir* which is so valuable for being based on his own recollections and those of his sisters, who had all grown up in Steventon Rectory just as she had. The Rectory itself was no more, having been pulled down and

rebuilt in a different spot by Edward Knight when William was installed incumbent. Mrs Austen was still alive at this date, and one wonders what she - and Cassandra - made of this desecration. So Jane Austen's birthplace has long since disappeared, though the village and church remain sufficiently unchanged to evoke her country girlhood for the present-day visitor.

Cassandra continued to live at Chawton Cottage until her death in 1845, after which it was divided into three dwellings for workers from the Chawton estate. About a hundred years later it was purchased by the Jane Austen Memorial Trust, restored and opened as a museum and place of pilgrimage, to be complemented some forty years later by the Jane Austen Visitor Centre in Bath.







"Well done, Miss Anne!"  
Chapter VI





The most perennially popular of English novelists, Jane Austen continues to amuse and delight generations of readers. Her novels have never been out of print and indeed there are over sixty editions of *Pride and Prejudice* currently available in the UK alone - plus translations into every major language across the world. Film and television versions have brought her legions of new and enthusiastic admirers, while she continues to be studied at university level.

In this book Maggie Lane tells the story of Jane Austen's brief but intense life and how experience and imagination shaped her six immortal novels.

Maggie Lane is the author of  
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*Jane Austen*



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